



Review: The Agricultural-Industrial Transition in New England

Reviewed Work(s): Most Wonderful Machine: Mechanization and Social Change in Berkshire Paper Making, 1801-1885 by Judith A. McGaw; The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America by Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude; Out of Work: The First Century of Unemployment in Massachusetts by Alexander Keyssar

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THE AGRICULTURAL-INDUSTRIAL TRANSITION
IN NEW ENGLAND

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Most Wonderful Machine: Mechanization and Social Change in Berkshire Paper Making, 1801–1885. By Judith A. McGaw. (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press. 1987. Pp. xv, 439. \$40.00 cloth.)

The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America. Edited by Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1985. Pp. vi, 355. \$36.00 cloth; \$9.95 paper.)

Out of work: The first century of unemployment in Massachusetts. By Alexander Keyssar. *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Modern History.* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press. 1986. Pp. xviii, 469. \$47.50 cloth; \$13.95 paper.)

The transition from agriculture to industry in New England has long been a central issue not only for historians of the region but for other scholars of nineteenth-century America as well. Two and three generations ago half-a-dozen women scholars, several of them associated with Smith College, produced what have come to be regarded as standard treatments of key aspects of the subject: Felicia Johnson Deyrup's *Arms Makers of the Connecticut Valley: A Regional Study of the Economic Development of the Small Arms Industry, 1798–1870* (1948); Constance McLaughlin Green's *Holyoke, Mass.: A Case History of the Industrial Revolution in America* (1939); Blanche E. Hazard's *The Organization of the Boot and Shoe Industry in Massachusetts before 1875* (1921); Margaret E. Martin's *Merchants and Trade in the Connecticut River Valley, 1750–1820* (1939); Margaret R. Pabst's *Agricultural Trends in the Connecticut Valley Region of Massachusetts, 1800–1900* (1941); Vera Shlakman's *Economic History of a Factory Town: A Study of Chicopee, Massachusetts* (1935); and Caroline F. Ware's *The Early New England Cotton Manufacturers: A Study of Industrial Beginnings* (1931). These studies, together with such notable works as George S. Gibb's *The Saco-Lowell Shops: Textile Machinery Building in New England, 1813–1949* (1950) and Norman Ware's *The Industrial Worker 1840–1860* (1924), have illuminated the history

of economy, community, and labor so clearly that we have long recognized that the transition from an agriculturally-based economy to an industrial one also comprehended fundamental alterations in the character of the social order.

For the most part change has been viewed in terms of before-and-after polarities, such as the movement of people from farms to factories and from rural to urban communities. In addition scholars have noted a shift from a semi-self-sufficient way of life to a capitalistic, marketplace society, where traditional, family-centered values yielded to a more calculating, individualistic outlook.¹ Owing to these multi-layered interpretations, the New England agricultural-industrial transition has come to signify more than a model of the economic history of one region; it has become a paradigm for the history of the entire nation in the nineteenth century. Agricultural New England has come to be seen as "the world we have lost"; while industrial New England has been regarded as the pacesetter for the rest of the country. The transition from agriculture to industry in New England has been treated as the engine for profound social and cultural changes.

Such a summary is, of course, a simplification of a rich, growing and durable body of scholarship, but it is useful in drawing attention to the scholarly enthusiasm for identifying polarities which feed a dialectical mode of analysis that is both arresting and persuasive. It is in this context that the three books reviewed here are so valuable, for although their topics and approaches vary, they all advance our level of knowledge not only by providing information but by reinforcing their readers' appreciation of the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of historical experience. Dialectic argumentation may be engaging, but, as these works show, there is much more to be considered in plotting actual historical behavior.

A gradual, evolutionary portrait of the agricultural-industrial

¹ Scholars do not agree on the timing and extent of these changes. See, e.g., my *Modernization: The Transformation of American Life, 1600-1865* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1976), chaps. 5 and 6; Christopher Clark, "The Household Economy, Market Exchange and the Rise of Capitalism in the Connecticut Valley, 1800-1860," *Journal of Social History* 13 (1979):169-90; James A. Henretta, "Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Pre-Industrial America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser. 35 (1978): 3-32; James T. Lemon, "Early Americans and Their Social Environment," *Journal of Historical Geography* 6 (April 1980): 115-32; Robert Mitchell, "The Formation of Early American Cultural Regions: An Interpretation," in *European Settlement and Development in North America*, ed. James R. Gibbons (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), pp. 86-90.

transition is presented in Judith McGaw's masterful analysis of Massachusetts' Berkshire County paper industry. Drawing on company records, family papers, and local histories and enhancing her book with fifty-four illustrations of people, places, and machinery, McGaw divides her study into three chronological and thematic parts: "Before the Machine," ca. 1800–30; "The Machine," ca. 1827–57; and, the longest segment, comprising half the book, "After the Machine," ca. 1857–85. In the first portion of her story, McGaw insightfully discusses how a handful of mobile artisan-entrepreneurs, such as Zenas Crane, who started the industry, capitalized on Berkshire's resources—abundant fresh water and water power sites as well as underemployed young farm men and women. During this first generation of Berkshire paper production, the scale of factories and of employment was so modest that McGaw finds no evidence to suggest that the new industry generated conflict, opposition, or indeed any disruption. The regularity of work ordered by clock time, the need to learn new methods, the attitudes of paper mill bosses and employees, even the new factory buildings and the materials used in production were all familiar to workers. So by the 1830s and 1840s, when the pace of mechanization and expansion quickened, the industry was an accepted feature of the social and economic landscape.

Had the people of Berkshire anticipated the full consequences of the second stage of industrial development, they might have opposed it. The record McGaw has uncovered, however, gives no hint that opposition or conflict of any sort was a significant problem for paper bosses as they imported machinery and expanded their operations during the middle decades of the century. In order to keep up with the burgeoning demand of New York City markets, Berkshire paper mills increased employment from about 300 workers in 1830, to 500 in 1850, and to a high of about 1500 in 1860. Throughout these decades, the gender ratio remained fairly constant, at about three female to two male workers. There were peaks and valleys in the business cycle, however, so employment was irregular. Between 1825 and 1834 annual production fluctuated by a factor of 10, from 15 tons per annum to 155. Thirty years later the range was even greater, from 30 to 412 tons (p. 411). Papermaking had become a highly competitive business, and, as in other ventures, bankruptcy was widespread and recurrent.

From the mill owners' perspective, economizing on the cost of

labor by investing in machinery was an attractive strategy. Before the advent of wood pulp paper in the 1860s, rags, that were now mostly imported from Europe, constituted the largest share of the manufacturer's cost of paper. Unable to control rising rag prices and tied to accounting practices that masked the actual costs of capital investment, owners tried to save money by reducing the numbers in the workforce and hiring less-skilled, cheaper labor. Thus employment was capped even before 1870, when the expansion of the wood-pulp paper industry in northern New England and elsewhere eclipsed the Berkshire mills, forcing them to adapt by producing high quality, specialty papers at relatively low volume. Although McGaw emphasizes the role of "social initiatives and cultural values" (p. 380) in this adaptation, much of the evidence suggests that economic judgments based on marketplace, technological, and manpower considerations directed the course of the Berkshire paper industry.

McGaw contends that the development of the paper industry in Berkshire is "broadly representative" (p. 378) of the national experience because a skilled, thrifty, and industrious population succeeded in applying a developing technology to the natural assets of the countryside. Because the industrial revolution in the United States before the Civil War is primarily a story of small-to-middle-sized industries that were tied to particular locales by natural or human resources, McGaw's view has much to recommend it. Likewise, the gender system of the paper industry, in which men held the more highly-skilled and more strenuous jobs, whereas women performed such tasks as sorting, finishing, and counting—jobs they could move into and out of at various stages of the life cycle—was characteristic of most industrial employment. The absence of overt conflict between workers and bosses in the paper industry was also, as McGaw claims, more typical of the ordinary factory situation than the class hostilities that marked large-scale textile, shoe, and metal-working communities. In Berkshire, as in much of early industrial America, the egalitarian ethos could flourish because most men were skilled, mobile, and personally acquainted with their bosses, men who had worked their way up to owning and managing mills and who still dwelled and worshiped among their employees. That Berkshire paper mills did not attract immigrant radicals into their diminishing, predominantly female labor force after 1860 further explains why such turbulence as the

industry witnessed was financial and economic, not political.

That McGaw's perspective, in which consensus characterized the agricultural-industrial transition, may not be as fully representative as she supposes is suggested by several of the essays included in *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation*, the work of eleven authors, two of whom, Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, are also its editors.² The scope of each free-standing essay depends upon the author's distinct historical concerns and area of research, ranging from particular communities in New England and Illinois and entire districts in South Carolina and Georgia, to whole states like Rhode Island, Minnesota, and Texas, and even, in one case, a vast continental region, the American West. This wide-ranging book makes no pretense to a systematic or comprehensive exploration of nineteenth-century America's encounter with industrialization. Instead several central themes—the transition from semi-subsistence to market agriculture, distinctions between native and immigrant farmers, the character of farm communities, and protest politics, rural labor systems, and the industrial transition in New England—are examined in a series of case studies.

Though all of the essays deserve attention, for the purposes of this review only those concerning New England are pertinent. In the book's opening essay Gary Kulik shows that in eighteenth-century Rhode Island and, later, in a scattering of places in southern New England, farmers resisted the efforts of manufacturers to appropriate water rights, build dams, and interfere with fishing. Ultimately the mill owners won the struggle, but a divisive spirit lingered well into the nineteenth century, as Jonathan Prude demonstrates in a related essay on the quasi-rural towns of Dudley and Oxford, Massachusetts, up the Blackstone River from Providence, Rhode Island. Here, as in Berkshire County, the scale of mills was small, and the employees were mostly Yankees dwelling in family units. Indeed, a significant share of the work was "put out" into nearby families. Yet there were still battles over mill dams, taxes, and town services—especially schools and roads—within the broader contest that pitted farmers against factory owners, their allies, and clients in a struggle for political control. Again, as in Kulik's study, the pro-industry side won, but rural townspeople

² The authors include Hal S. Barron, Kathleen Neils Conzen, Thomas Dublin, John Mack Faragher, Steven Hahn, David Jaffee, Gary Kulik, Howard Lamar, Robert C. McMath, Jr., Jonathan Prude, and John Scott Strickland.

were not complaisant in defeat. In the next generation, the still smoldering antagonisms fueled the Know-Nothing uprising of the 1850s, which was much more than merely an anti-immigrant movement.³

The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation does not, however, as a whole, seek to establish the predominance of conflict in the transition era, as is evident in the essays of Thomas Dublin, David Jaffee, and Hal S. Barron. Dublin's fine-grained analysis of women doing outwork between 1830 and 1850 in Fitzwilliam, a hill town in the southwest corner of New Hampshire—like Jaffee's study of itinerant portrait makers, 1760–1860, and Barron's discussion of late nineteenth-century Chelsea, in central Vermont—points to complementary relationships among farm life, commerce, and industry and demonstrates that an urbane standard of living came to pervade the countryside. Dublin's analysis of a storekeeper's ledgers in conjunction with census and genealogical records shows that palm-leaf hat making was welcomed into rural homes as a means of earning the cash or credit necessary to maintain a respectable living standard on shrinking farms. Although outwork paid less than Lowell mill-work, it also provided women with an opportunity to remain at home, to assist their families in flexible ways, and to preserve their domestic way of life; therefore, outwork not only increased possibilities for consumption but also the alternatives available to women and families. For a generation or so, sons, daughters, and wives had kept their own accounts with storekeepers with whom they exchanged home products for store goods. As industrialization and commercialization developed, opportunities for home production expanded to include, for women, hand-loom weaving, sewing shoe uppers, and braiding palm-leaf hats. In providing new economic options, then, industry and commerce certainly enhanced rural experience.

The studies by Jaffee and Barron bear less directly on the agricultural-industrial transition, yet they, too, imply that the process was relatively peaceful. Jaffee finds that people in the hinterlands were eager to purchase the urban respectability that

³ Dale Baum, *The Civil War Party System: The Case of Massachusetts, 1848–1876* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), chap. 2; Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s–1840s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), chap. 14.

itinerant portrait painters sold. Patronized by village merchants, lawyers, doctors, clergymen, manufacturers, and prosperous farmers, painters created portraits in which fashionable dress and hair styles as well as opulent furnishings were on display for all to see. By the 1840s itinerants were also producing inexpensive, framed daguerreotypes and paper silhouettes, so the enthusiasm for display could be indulged in the most modest homes, rural as well as urban.

Barron's essay, largely a synopsis of his book-length study of Chelsea, Vermont, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (1984), explores the emergence of rural stability, homogeneity, and a kind of insularity following the transition era. Conflicts on subjects such as national politics, revivals, and temperance that had divided Chelsea in the first half of the nineteenth century faded, and the community was more closely-knit than ever before. In backwaters like this, Barron argues, the agricultural-industrial transition created not conflict but consensus. Here, as with the other studies referred to in *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation*, the polarities are not distinct, and a dialectic process does not appear to have propelled events. Industrialization penetrated the New England countryside, left its stamp on rural culture, and influenced agricultural life in manifold ways. Sometimes, as in Rhode Island, industrialization seems to have undermined rural culture, but in Berkshire County and in Vermont, locations remote from great manufacturing centers, rural life retained its vitality.

Alexander Keyssar's analysis of the emergence of structural unemployment, on the other hand, points to a decisive, if gradual, break between the industrial and pre-industrial eras. His thorough, thoughtful, and revealing study demonstrates how painful the consequences of seemingly progressive advances in commercial integration and industrial development ultimately could be. As Keyssar explains it, in the eighteenth century involuntary unemployment had been virtually unknown outside of the port towns. Even people who were partially disabled, physically or mentally, had been integrated into the household-based production system. *Underemployment* was, Keyssar notes, a chronic condition, and standards of efficiency and of consumption were accordingly low compared with those of the middle and late nineteenth century. *Unemployment* was rare, however, because family farms, artisan shops, and domes-

tic service included workers of all ages and both sexes at many levels of skill and competence. Artisans maintained subsistence plots of land or could retreat to farm families for food and shelter during slack periods. And although cash was always scarce, credit on a small scale was widely available from shopkeepers, neighbors, and family. With most heads of household being self-employed, layoffs affected few people.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, Keyssar explains, a variety of interrelated changes associated with industrialization transformed conditions of employment. Large factories, increasing the distance between bosses and employees, depersonalized work relationships. In an increasingly competitive environment, in which pressures for profit-enhancement were ever present, employers routinely used layoffs to cut costs and the threat of firings to assure discipline. Moreover, as we have seen in the paper industry, it made good business sense to replace some workers with machines; and as investments in machinery grew, it was often more profitable to produce at peak levels sporadically, in response to immediate orders, than to assure steady employment by maintaining a large inventory. Manufacturers bore the costs of unsold inventory, whereas the community bore the costs of idled workers who, cut off from the support networks supplied by the farm economy, were especially vulnerable to layoffs even before immigrant competition arrived in the 1830s and 1840s.

According to Keyssar the problem of unemployment arose in the several slack years after 1815 and intensified once more during the depression following the 1837 panic. A recognition of class conflict—capitalists pitted against labor—now emerged in public discourse. Finding machinery more easy to manipulate than workers, capitalists came to believe in the need for a permanent labor surplus as they invested in plant facilities rather than labor. By 1850, Keyssar concludes, the elasticity in the labor market required by capitalists was provided by a reserve labor force of unemployed workers, whereas earlier the same purpose had been achieved through underemployment and flexible outwork. Keyssar notes with irony that in 1911 even state officials had come to use the expression “reserve army” (p. 72) to describe the structural unemployment in Massachusetts.

Keyssar’s approach, which is grounded in extensive and detailed analyses of state and federal employment figures in dozens of jobs

(43 tables are included) does not make for lively reading, and a few case studies of particular workers could have enriched his discussion. But it would be misleading to imply that *Out of Work* is only a statistical account; it is, instead, a topically- and chronologically-constructed narrative that culminates in a penetrating and persuasive discussion of the politics of unemployment in the Progressive era. For the purposes of Keyssar's study, the agricultural-industrial transition supplies the prologue for one of the central problems of the fully developed capitalist industrial order.

The "most wonderful machine" yielded remarkable efficiencies that created a higher living standard; thus industrialization provided great benefits to some, perhaps most, New Englanders. But the costs, as Keyssar's account makes clear, included insecurity, privation, and suffering for many people at various stages in their lives. By the early twentieth century, vulnerability to unemployment was one of the key elements for the class system and a powerful tool for disciplining employees in the middle as well as the working class, not just in Massachusetts and New England but in the nation as a whole.

At this most general level, none of the works discussed here revises prevailing scholarly views dramatically. What they all supply, however, are sophisticated and informative analyses of precisely how New England was being transformed over the course of the nineteenth century. McGaw's monograph on the Berkshire paper industry is a model that combines the histories of management, labor, and technology within a regional context. Hahn and Prude's collection explores a variety of the social and cultural challenges posed by the agricultural-industrial transition to illuminate the actual experiences of people in little-known, though representative, communities. Finally, Keyssar charts in detail the development of structural unemployment in one area of industrial America, permitting scholars to begin exploring its wide-ranging consequences. Though we still have much to learn about the agricultural-industrial transition, these fresh and creative studies make an important contribution that carries our collective inquiries forward.

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